

Advent 2014 – Third Sunday

Dec 14, 2014

Found by Joy

Ps 80:126 & Isaiah 61:8-10a

(146, 147, 153, 172)

I wasn't expecting it to be a joyful time.
I was in the big house in rural Ontario all alone.
My dear friends and surrogate parents,
Bona and John Duncan,
had died earlier this year – Bona in May and John in October.
Their warm and welcoming physical presence was not there.
Their daughters, Bona and Sarah, had begun to empty the house
of the carpets and furniture.
My job in all of this was to deal with the disposal
of John's books and papers –
over 5,000 books and about 70 boxes of various kinds of papers.
It's an ongoing job, to be finished finally when the house sells.
And I was not expecting to find joy there this week.

But joy was there and it found me.

It was the joy of memories –
finding the sermon John preached when we first met,
the one he preached at my induction at Glebe in Toronto,
the ones he preached for the ordinations of other dear friends,
the funerals he did for companions who have passed on,
the one on which he had written "Bona said this bombed!"
John decided to come to Knox College in Toronto
after a career in insurance in Detroit, Michigan.
He had been active in the church all his life.
He heard one of the Knox professors, David Hay,
on CBC radio and decided he needed to study with that man.
After graduating in 1961, having married Bona while in Toronto,
he went to a parish in Ishpeming in northern Michigan,
then to the maximum security prison in Marquette,

then to Perth, Ontario,
then to our church offices as secretary for Evangelism and Social Action,
then to St. Giles, Sarnia,
then to retirement in Norland, Ontario,
where they bought this grand limestone and pine house.
John was opinionated.
Thankfully, most of the opinions were worth considering and instructive.

Bona lived too much of her life in John's shadow.
She came by that naturally,
being a minister's daughter in the 1940s and 1950s
who went into nursing and worked most of her career in geriatrics.
After retirement, she came into her own
and the spirituality nourished by that life of giving
took on a maturity that allowed her to move through her death
with confidence and freedom,
attitudes to death that I never put together in quite the way she did.
Both lives were joys to those they touched.

It was also the joy of a good grief.
The last few times in Norland over the past couple of years
were hurried and harried,
filled with discussions of what John wanted done
with his books and papers, a bit of which was realistic.
In between those conversations, long drives to Lindsay
to take Bona to her radiation treatments,
filled with intimate talk of hope, peace, joy, and love -
Advent in February, because she wasn't going to be here
for Advent in December.

Then Bona's funeral on her 80th birthday in May.
And, 5 months later, John's funeral in his 88th year.
They were good passings, as death goes,
filled with their own very different versions
of Christian hope, peace, joy, and love.
But this trip to Norland was different.
Just me and all the energies of those relationships
in that space where so much grace had been shared.
It was sad, and warm, and healing.
The grief remains, but it is enveloped in grace,
and that is a joy.

John's favourite prophet was Isaiah.
His sermons were easier to sort and file than I thought.
He kept most of them in binders along with his research notes
from various theologians, Biblical commentators, and devotional writers.
The binders on Isaiah were the largest.
I didn't come across a sermon on this particular passage,
but there might very well be one there.
My eyes got a bit blurry and my fingers a bit cramped
from taking out all the staples and paper clips from the sermons and notes.
You have to do that for the archives to ensure the best preservation.

If this particular passage wasn't highlighted,
the themes certainly were.
God's love of justice and hatred of robbery and wrongdoing
was always central to John's mission and ministries.
He had a profound sense of vocation to work with this God
inherited from previous generations of God's covenant people.
He wanted Christian faith to be seen and understood.
He wanted people to see and feel the blessing
that flowed from an intimate relationship with God
that transformed the way you saw, acted, and impacted the world.
And in all this serious, life-transforming, earth-changing stuff,
there was always great joy that infused your whole being
so you exulted – literally, 'leaped for joy' – in this God
who had found you and made you their own.

This is no easy or simple joy that Isaiah witnesses to.
Remember, he is writing in the midst of global upheavals and insecurities.
God's people have been conquered and scattered.
There are signs of hope, but no clear guarantees in the events of the day.
Hope for and the peace of joy comes from God alone,
from faithful following in the ways of this God of justice and blessing.
That may not make sense in the minds of the gloating conquerors
or in the minds of the bitter vanquished.
But it is the sense that this God of covenant and compassion invites us to make.
Don't let the conflicted complexity all around you
define and confine your perspective on your possibilities.
There is a force, a power, an energy
that is seeking to find you and enlist you
in a different way of being in the world.

It is inviting you to be a source of hope, peace, joy and love
in your circles of influence.

When you begin to pay attention to this dynamic presence,
gentle and subtle as it is in its persuasive power,
you will begin to feel at home in yourself, with others, and with God,
as if for the first time.

This is the joy you were created to know,
the joy that fills you when it finds itself at the core of your being.

This is the joy of the prodigals come home,
where they began and where they belong.

This is the joy of the household energized and organized to party
to celebrate their return.

This is the joy of flourishing in the grace of Jesus Christ.
It is what we strive to nourish here at Brentwood Presbyterian Church.

Don't expect it to be easy, or simple, or comfortable.

As you continue to understand the depths of the grace and truth
found in the revelations of this incarnation of God
that we celebrate at Christmas,

it will scare the bejeebers out of you,

just like it did with so many involved in that first Christmas.

But as you experience and ponder the love that came down at Christmas,
you will be filled more and more with a joy that cannot be suppressed,
a joy that is more powerful than any depressing threat,
a joy that carries you through death itself.

That is the joy that finds us in Jesus Christ,
that found me afresh in Norland this week,
the joy that we celebrate this Christmas.

***Now to him who by the power at work within us
is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine,
to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations,
forever and ever. Amen
(Eph 3:20-21)***